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ABSTRACT

Participants in the New York State School and Business Alliance program, which is designed to strengthen the partnership among public schools, the private sector, communities, and government are working to improve secondary education as well as the quality of the youth labor force. The Alliance Development Committee (ADC) of Yonkers, New York comprises volunteer representatives from local businesses, private industry, organized labor, community, and school organization. The ADC is recruiting local employees to offer job pledges and apprentice shops. Plans call for connecting students with mentors, who are seasoned workers willing to share expertise and open doors of opportunity. The long-term goal extends beyond the students and their schools. Fifty percent of the Yonkers "at risk" students now earn a secondary school diploma because of this program. (SM)

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The School and Business Alliance 'Blooms' in Yonkers

The actor on the stage of Yonkers Prep had mumbled through the first few lines of improvised theater when the director interrupted.

"The gum is terrible," said Martin Henderson, 38, to the teenager facing him on a folding chair. "It's the worst thing you could do. It changes the appearance of your face."

He turned to the rest of the "company," 11 high school students who would each have a chance to practice a job interview as Henderson played the part of a personnel officer. "Take off those hats," he said, putting on his director's hat. "Take out the gum."

Previously, he had scripted the encounter, without writing any of the specific dialogue: "Look me in the eye. Shake my hand. Don't dance around when you shake my hand. Remember that the most powerful thing you can do on the stage (dramatic pause) is nothing."

For Henderson himself, the morning session was a kind of rehearsal for pre-employment training he planned to offer this spring through the New York State School and Business Alliance (SABA). He was one of scores of people in nine New York cities gearing up for the $1.65-million program to strengthen the partnership among public schools, the private sector, the community and government. When the curtain is finally up on dozens of projects now in formation, Henderson and others will be working to improve secondary education as well as the quality of the youth labor force.

Henderson's class operates as part of the Alliance of Yonkers under the direction of the city's 23-member Alliance Development Committee (ADC). The ADC comprises volunteer representatives from local businesses, the Yonkers Private Industry Council (PIC), organized labor, community and school organizations (including Yonkers superintendent Donald M. Batista) and the state government. Coordinator for the whole Yonkers alliance is APEE board member Lee H. Bloom, an attorney and former vice chairman of Unilever United States Inc. The initial goal, Bloom, said, is to reach out to about 25 Yonkers students including 11 seniors, and to expand the group to 40 before the end of 1987. To serve these students, the ADC is recruiting local employers to offer job pledges and apprenticeships. Plans also call for connecting students with mentors - seasoned workers willing to share expertise on a one-to-one basis and open doors of opportunity - and providing career counseling. But the long-term goal extends beyond the students and their schools. Like every Alliance throughout the state, programs in Yonkers are designed to benefit businesses as well.

"My basic approach is that anything business does to support the Alliance is for their own welfare," Bloom said. "It's not done out of charity." The major incentive for businesses, Bloom added is that as SABA programs take hold, "employers will have an increased confidence in SABA entry-level employees."

The debut of the Alliance program here comes at a time when Yonkers, the state's fourth largest city (population: 195,000), appears to be gaining ground on several of its problems. Its 18,000-student public school system has survived a federal desegregation order without major disruption. New stores have laid foundations. The city government has been producing balanced budgets after two close calls with bankruptcy. Yonkers Prep is a success story in itself. All of its 60 students came from other schools where they were at serious risk of dropping out of the system. Now, about 50 percent of them go on to get a high school diploma, according to teacher Joe Buttacavoli. And many of those who don't graduate, he said, learn enough to go out and get jobs anyway. Its record made the school an attractive site for launching a model Alliance program, one that Bloom hopes will work so well it can be exported

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throughout the city system.

Bloom inaugurated the Alliance last winter at Yonkers Prep with a speech on the same stage where Marty Henderson's students would later hone job-interview skills.

"I emphasized that it didn't matter what their intelligence or past record or economic level was." Bloom said recently. "Each individual can make a difference."

He followed up this half-hour pep talk with 20- to 30-minute individual meetings to find out what students were interested in doing.

The personal contact had a galvanizing effect on many of the teenagers. Some began to refer to themselves as "Bloomsters." Before Bloom began working with him, "I was just really confused," said 18-year old Billy Zorilo. "College life wasn't for me, and I knew I had to find a good job."

Zorilo summarized the fears of many of his contemporaries who are about to cross the bridge between classroom and workplace.

"My whole life, my mother's been supporting me," he said. "Mom, I want this. Mom, I want that."

"Now I have to buy it for myself. It's scary. What happens if you don't get a job? What happens if you go on an interview and the guy doesn't like the way you look or whatever? You're left sitting at home twiddling your thumbs. And then suddenly you're 21."

Zorilo told Bloom he had some interest in becoming an electrician. "Next thing I know, he was telling me I had an interview with this guy for an apprenticeship training program for the electricians' union," Zorilo said. The interview went well, he said, and Zorilo feels more secure about his dream for life five years from now. "I'd like to be well-off, to be everything I want to be. Hopefully, I'll get it."

Like Zorilo, Bloom hopes the school and Business Alliance will become everything it wants to be, but Bloom said that not all of his optimistic plans for the Alliance had paid off. The Chamber of Commerce sent letters on behalf of SABA to all of its members in late February, asking for help in setting up summer jobs, mentorships, tutoring, speakers and plant tours. "It looked like a good letter," Bloom said. A month later, there had been no responses, an outcome Bloom said was "very discouraging."

But in early spring, Bloom began a series of personal follow-up calls and visits to prime prospects. Now he is hopeful that he is beginning to get his basic message across to other business people. Bloom's credo: "I want to convince them of the merits of their involvement - for their own good."